



EXODUS, PART 23

GRUMBLING V. GRACE, Pt. 1

Exodus 17.1-7

Just this past week I read or heard about several events in the news.

- A man walked into an 11:00 worship service and shot his ex-wife to death as she played the organ. He left the building, then re-entered and shot her twice more to make sure she was dead.
- In a NYC subway, a homeless man supposedly picked a commuter at random and pushed the man onto the tracks of an oncoming train. The man was killed, but not before a reporter was able to take a picture of the man struggling to get back onto the platform and crying for help. No one made any effort to help him.
- Last month, both Colorado and Washington State legalized recreational use of marijuana and approved same-sex marriage.
- The Supreme Court of the U.S. is scheduled to hear a case concerning the defense of Marriage Act, passed in 1996. For matters related to Federal cases, this law defines marriage as only between a man and a woman. The court is expected to overturn the law, which will basically make same-sex marriages legal in the U.S.
- An elementary school in North Carolina censored a first-grade student's Veterans Day poem by removing a line that referenced her grandfather's belief in God. A spokesperson for the school said, "When the little girl wrote the poem and included a reference to God, she had every right to do that."



The First Amendment protects all Americans. She had every right to mention God, [but] that dynamic changed when they asked her to read it at an assembly."

- This week the President of France called for outlawing of homework. According to President, homework favors students from more wealthy families because they are more likely to have a good working environment at home, including parents with the time and energy to help them with their work, creating an inequality for students who are not so fortunate.
- The recently-elected President of our own country has expressed publicly his support for same-sex marriages as well as the abortion – spell that murder – of full-term babies which survive the abortion process. No matter his public or private profession of faith in Christ, no person holding such views of life can claim the title of Christian.

The preponderance of such stories causes us to reel back on our heels. These are astounding items for those of us who are over 40. We cannot believe most of the things that we hear in the news each day are actually happening.

But we should expect the world to get worse instead of better as long as that world continues to reject the truth and the lordship of Jesus Christ and refuses to acknowledge the existence of a holy and righteous, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God.

If you are as old as I am, you remember back before there were iPhones and mp3 players, before there were cds, even before there were cassettes and 8-tracks, to the time when music was recorded on disks we called records.

You might also remember that, if one of those records was badly scratched or cracked or broken, the needle would reach that certain point in the song and begin to repeat the few words that came just before the scratch.



That is what I thought of as I read these verses in Exodus 17 – a broken record.

Before the biblical record of the Exodus is finished, one of the most prominent features of the people of Israel is that they are chronic complainers.

- Ex. 14.11. When the people looked back and saw Pharaoh in pursuit, they immediately accused Moses of intentionally leading them out of Egypt so that they could be killed by Pharaoh's army.
- Ex. 15.24. Second complaint because the water they found after three days of wandering was too bitter to drink. Once again, they blamed Moses for the problem.
- Ex. 16.3. The people complained bitterly against Moses once again as they headed into the Wilderness of Sin, fearing that they were going to die of hunger. This time, Moses made it very clear to the people that their complaints were not honest, because the one they were truly angry with was God since he was the one who had led them there.
- Now, in Ex. 17.2-3, as the people leave the barren Wilderness of Sin and head into the mountainous region of Horeb and Sinai, they are thirsty – and quite legitimately so after traveling such a great distance over the sands of the Wilderness. Once again Moses receives the brunt of their complaints, this time coupled with threats of murder if Moses doesn't do something quickly to solve the dilemma.

Once again, Moses reminds the people that they are talking to the wrong person. He might be the leader of the people on earth, but they are all being guided by God.

Verse 1 says, "All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the



commandment of the LORD." The NLT says it like this: "At the LORD's command, the whole community of Israel left the wilderness of Sin."

We do not know for sure what it looked like, but remember that going before the people was a billowing cloud of smoke and fire in which the angel of the Lord resided, guiding the entire nation in their journey. Apparently, this cloud could be seen by all of the people, so there should have been no doubt about why they were traveling where they were traveling.

At this point in the story, the nation had left the Wilderness of Sin and were encamped at a place called Rephidim. Numbers 33 tells us that there were two other stops between Elim and Rephidim, but apparently nothing of note happened at these two encampments, so Moses left them out of this part of the story.

Having left the Wilderness of Sin, the people noticed a distinctive change in the terrain over which they were traveling. Instead of sandstone, the ground was hard and rocky. They were entering the piedmont area of the mountains that had made up their horizon for the last several weeks.

In this particular part of the journey, they had to travel through a pass that was relatively narrow – only about 40 feet wide, that went on for some distance between high, almost perpendicular walls of granite. While the overhanging cliffs at least shielded them from the direct rays of the hot sun, still this region was barren and intensely dry. Thus it was not long before the people began to experience a terrible thirst.

In verse 2, they cried out to Moses concerning their thirst. Moses, in some degree of exasperation, shouted back at them, "Be quiet. You might be quarreling with me, but in reality you are testing God."

While we are inclined to hear the sound of anger in Moses' reply to the people, there is more the evidence of his love and compassion



for them, warning them against their attitude before the righteous indignation of God fell on them in judgment.

Moses realized that these complaints were more than just words of distress being spoken by discouraged people. They were, in fact, challenging God – calling him to prove himself to them, as if they had not already seen enough of God to never need any further proof ever again.

In verse 7, Moses named this place Meribah – a word which means quarreling in its simplest definition, but which actually was a term related to legal matters meaning contention or litigation.

He also named it Massah, which means “testing place,” but which goes much further by its definition of temptation or trial.

The people were not simply grouching over an uncomfortable situation, but they were actually expressing a severe lack of faith in the God who delivered them from Egypt.

We might expect such thinking or challenges from people of the world who do not know God, but we do not expect the people of God to express such doubt.

We hear the complaint of the people in verse 7: "Is GOD here with us, or not?"

This was more than murmuring or complaining. With these words, the people of God were questioning his very existence as well as his power and providence.

If we die of thirst, it will prove several things:

1. God does not really exist. We don't know what that cloud is all about, but God must not be in it or we would not be so thirsty.
2. Even if God does exist, He is not good. God is supposed to be love, but to allow such evil as this to exist proves that he



cannot be love, for one who loved would not allow his people to suffer.

3. If God exists, then he is not all-powerful. Apparently, he does not have the power to prevent evil.

Thus, we are inclined to reject believe in such a God and to put our trust in man – a man such as Moses, for in truth, it was he and not God who freed us from Egypt.

However, we are open-minded people. If God will deliver us and our children and our cattle from this evil of thirst, then we will believe that God actually exists and dwells among us.

Before closing, it is important that we notice that, while the people in this story do not believe, they are not referred to as unbelievers. In fact, next week, we will call attention to the second part of this sermon which deals with God's grace.

These are the people of Israel – the chosen people of God – who, when faced with a crisis of deprivation and adversity, do not have a faith that is strong enough to sustain their trust in God.

Yet as we will see next week, God's mercy is ever faithful. He is slow to anger and long-suffering, as full of grace and mercy as the people are with doubts and fears.